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ABSTRACT

A class project used in one college-level business French course in Oregon involves creation of a French company using a modified simulation approach. Students work in groups to determine what product or service they would like to develop and research the creation of a company. During this process, they simulate a number of situations encountered in establishing a business, including correspondence and documentation. Currently, the entire course is based on the project. Steps include: (1) selecting a product or service the students have a personal interest in and that can be marketed in France; (2) determining the legal status of the company, using authentic documents; (3) locating the business in France; (4) creation of logo, letterhead, and other company documents; (5) creating job announcements for employees; (6) determining needed banking accounts and services; (7) ordering supplies and equipment; and (8) planning marketing and advertising. Other topics, such as customs and trade regulations, can be incorporated. Students make oral presentations near the end of the course, using role-playing and supporting visual aids. A written report is also required. Student response to the project has been enthusiastic, and the approach is felt to be effective in promoting active learning. (MSE)

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A Class Project for the Business French Course**

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Creating a Business in France:

A Class Project for the Business French Course

One of the challenges of teaching a course on Business French is that many of the students who take such a course do not have a business background. As language or humanities majors, they are frequently less interested in discussing business and financial terms, and the course content, beyond the memorization of new vocabulary words, may hold little appeal for them. Elsewhere, the need of including both capital C and small c cultural components in Business French courses has been stressed (Morris 9-10; Cholakian 666; Orban 419). David M. Uber and Christine Uber Grosse support developing cultural awareness through cross-cultural problem solving (247-54). Students need to be able to approach material presented in a business French course in a culturally meaningful way and one which will be relevant to them. As in other language courses, they "need to move beyond themselves and their familiar environment to confront the realities of other cultures" (Schneider 625).

To facilitate this transition, some foreign language educators have recently advocated simulation. Simulation allows students to function in the foreign language classroom as if they were in the target culture. As Judith Schneider indicates, simulation "can give students comprehensible input in the target language and culture with which they can identify, so that foreign material initially viewed as the object of study becomes acquired and recreated subjectively on a personal level." (625)

To allow students in the business French course to more effectively assimilate the material, and to provide opportunity for student creativity, particularly for students with a non-business background, I have developed a modified simulation project for the business French course, in which students create an imaginary company in France. Using knowledge learned progressively in the course, students, working in groups, determine the product or service they would like to develop, where their French company will be located, and the legal steps and budget necessary to begin their business. They subsequently simulate a number of situations encountered in establishing a business, complete with letters and other necessary documents. Through this project, students apply knowledge learned during the course to a specific situation, thereby assimilating the material in a creative and enjoyable way.

The idea for the project first came several years ago, when I taught a business French course for the first time at Southern Oregon State College. Southern Oregon State College is a four-year undergraduate institution of approximately 4500 students. The average student age is 26, and many non-traditional students return to complete degrees after an hiatus of several years. Our Business French course is a one term, three credit hour course, taught at the third-year level, but many fourth year students take the course as well. In that initial course, one of the students was employed for a local company which was in the process of creating a branch office in France. My student brought to the

class some of the problems and documents the company encountered during the process. As we examined and worked on them in class, I realized that we were gaining some valuable experience that was not found in the textbook. The students were fascinated by the outside material, because they realized it was authentic. Business terms and practices discussed in class suddenly became more relevant, as students were able to see how it could be applied to a specific situation. The next time I taught the class, I did not have the luxury of having a student currently employed by a company developing relations with France. I therefore invented the project as a means to help students approach, as much as possible, the same type of experience.

The first time I used the project, I introduced it half way through the term, after we had already discussed many of the required components. I felt that I needed to give students some background before sending them off to create a business. However, students became so involved with the project, enjoyed working on it, and assimilated the material so much more effectively that I soon modified my course so that the entire class was organized around creating a business in France. I began introducing the project the first day of class. Many class assignments subsequently relate directly to the project, as students, in practicing correspondence or other business French tasks, do so in the context of their imaginary company.

The first step is to help students determine the type of product or service they will provide. Although students have

total freedom, and have created businesses ranging from a hang-gliding company to restaurants or bookstores, I require two criteria: 1) Students should choose a product about which they have some knowledge and interest. For some, this is the opportunity to create a "dream company"; others choose products or services related to their professional career goals or to companies for whom they have already worked, or, in some cases, a family business. 2) Whatever the product chosen, I require students to demonstrate how and why their product or service will sell in France. During the first part of the course, we discuss French cultural habits which influence buying, including daily habits related to food, clothing and shopping, the resistance to purchasing in bulk or large quantities, attitudes towards leisure activities and vacations, certain aspects of French politics which can influence the business climate, the notion of quality, and surveys indicating French purchasing habits and household items. I rely on knowledge students already have as well as articles that I provide and my own experience. In addition, I invite native French speakers from the community to address these cultural differences as well. During this initial stage, one or two representatives of local companies which have business relations with France speak to the class about their experiences.

Once students have selected a product, they must determine the legal status of their company or "forme juridique." Here, I rely extensively on documents obtained from the Paris Chamber of Commerce Summer program for teaching business French, including a

document prepared by Marcel Gabay entitled "Creation d'une société en France" and numerous other documents which help students to understand the differences between the various French legal entities. In determining the legal classification of their company, students need to begin thinking about how much capital they will need and from what sources they will obtain the necessary financing. This is one of the most challenging parts of the process. Students often lack a general knowledge of potential costs as well as an appreciation for cost variances and the exchange rates. To facilitate this process, I draw upon a number of materials - mail order catalogues or mailings that I have picked up from recent trips to France, and, more recently, the Minitel, which can help in determining costs for a variety of products and services. At this point, students need only determine a rough estimate of initial costs, in order to determine the type of company they will create. Later, they will turn in with the final project a detailed budget of their initial expenses.

Students must next determine where in France they will locate their business. Most students at this level have only a limited knowledge of the various regions in France, and particularly the products or resources common to each area. We therefore do an overview of the geographical and political regions of France and their primary goods and resources. We also study DATAR, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of establishing a business in Paris or in the provinces. Students must

consider not only the appropriateness of their product to the region, but also the availability of transportation, natural or other necessary resources, available workforce, and so forth. Using the Minitel, they can also determine housing costs or other cost of living factors. I try to discourage students from choosing an area where they would like to be and to choose the area which will be best suited for their particular company.

Once students have completed these initial steps, I provide a myriad of other activities related to formulating a business. They create their own logo and letterhead for their company, modeled after examples of French letter head. They also must determine and create, on a limited basis, other documents necessary to the company, such as order forms or service agreements, using when possible models available. With access to computers, many students enjoy the creativity allowed them through this type of activity. It also requires them to study more thoroughly details of authentic documents used as models.

Students must next determine what kind of personnel they will require and appropriate salary levels. To assist them in this process, we study job announcements and the legal and cost factors related to hiring in France. Using this information, they create their own job announcements for the positions they anticipate in their company, then, they respond to one of the announcements created by others in the class, writing a letter of application and making their own CV. Each student must then respond to the letters of application received and, eventually,

as a follow-up, interview those who have applied for jobs with his or her company.

As we study banking and the various types of banking accounts, including a CCP and other services of the P et T, students must determine what kind of accounts they will have, both personally and for their profession, and, using brochures obtained from three major French banks, they also have to choose with which bank they will open their account and explain why. In this as in all activities related to this project, the teacher can create a variety of role play situations to encourage communication in the language. I also allow students to review material regarding loans, as some may desire to obtain a bank loan for their business. If they decide to do so, they fill out a loan application with the bank. I play the role in this situation of the bank employee to determine whether or not the loan will be granted.

Students taking a business French course generally have very limited knowledge of typical office vocabulary. To help teach this vocabulary, I require students to order the supplies and equipment necessary to set up their office in France, using authentic catalogues from French office supply stores. Where possible, students determine costs of other equipment necessary to their operation; in so doing, they are often required to do some research on their own to determine the terminology for industry specific equipment or supplies, and, where possible, estimated costs.

One of the more interesting components of the project is marketing and advertising. After reviewing and analyzing several French ads from magazines, trade journals and television, students determine their own marketing strategy, and must create an ad for their company or one of its products. A marketing specialist in the business department shares some general marketing principles for students who have not already had a marketing course. I encourage students to be creative, but also expect their ads to reflect cultural authenticity. Some choose to do television spots, which are videotaped and shared with the other students, or radio announcements. Once they have completed their ad, other students in the class review and critique them. I also share them with one or two native French speakers to help assess their marketing value.

Other material studied in the course is readily applicable to the project. In studying customs for example, students can imagine that a foreign company (in England or Germany) has expressed interest in their product or service. They must determine and arrange for the mode of transportation, the transport through customs, insurances, and other shipping and handling obligations.

Throughout the project, I introduce a variety of simulation activities involving order forms and commercial correspondence to enhance student learning. For example, a client who is not satisfied with a product, or who wishes to order more than it is possible to provide in a certain period of time. The pos-

sibilites are unlimited, and simulation activities involving the creation of the company can be extended to any subject matter or vocabulary the professor chooses to approach in the class.

Again, the intent is to personalize the assignments to coincide with the type of industry the students develop. By providing this personal contextualization for each assignment, students assimilate the material in a more meaningful fashion. Writing business letters is no longer just another exercise, but an important way of solving a problem which may have arisen in their new company.

Two weeks before the end of the term, students must present orally their project to the class. In the oral report, students explain the various steps they went through in creating their company, including all of those mentioned above, and provide a detailed budget for the first three months of operation. They must also indicate the financial sources for starting their company and justify the choices they have made. I encourage students to create visuals for their oral presentations or to bring in other information which may support their project. They can have notes, but must not read from prepared text. I videotape the presentations, which can then be used for self-critique as suggested by Clara Orban (421). To make the final oral presentation more meaningful, I recently set it up so that students are assuming that they are presenting the project to a group of potential investors. They therefore have to concentrate not only on what they are going to see, but also on how they can present

their company in a way which will attract investors. Other students in the class play the role of business or community leaders interested in investing in the new company. The students in the class ask questions, play the role of the devil's advocate, and critique the project. The presenters must convince them of the value of the project, and the student investors complete the role play by discussing among themselves whether or not the project is worthy of funding. They may offer suggestions for improvement which can be incorporated in the final written report on the project submitted at the end of the quarter.

The written report covers essentially the same material as in the oral report, with modifications based on the feedback from the oral presentation. By this point in the quarter, students have become quite familiar with the projects of other students in the class. They may even decide to change the legal status of their company, or make other major modifications based on comments others have made.

Students have received the project enthusiastically. They enjoy working on *their* company, and they complete the course with a sense of accomplishment. Although the reality of establishing a business in France is much more challenging and frustrating than students experience in the class, they learn in a personal way the business French material. Through this individualization, subject matter and assignments become more meaningful, and are more effectively assimilated. The project allows students to use their own creativity in applying the material

learned in class. They master knowledge of business terms and practices much better by using it in a specific, personalized context, and they enjoy doing it at the same time.

Instructors can adapt the project to their individual needs and the focus of courses on their campus. It requires work in providing appropriate materials, but the rewards to both students and faculty are worth the additional effort. It provides a method whereby the Business French course becomes more than just a routine memorization of new vocabulary or the formalities of letter writing, and allows students to develop communicative competency with the material studied, and provides a unified approach to Business French studies frequently lacking in such courses.

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